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Women and Healthy Sexuality

"I was a bit uncomfortable with that exercise," I faltered to my supervisor. As a counseling intern, I had just participated in a touch/intimacy experience. We had been divided into groups of three and taken turns giving and receiving hand massages. Actually the exercise hadn't been the problem; the problem was a remark from Lowell, a fellow student, delivered with surprise and candor after he had massaged my hand, "I'd like to kiss you!"

"What was your difficulty?" my supervisor inquired.

"Well, it had the potential to awaken sexual feelings."

"What is the difficulty with sexual feelings?" He was smiling by this time. I struggled, "There's no problem with sexual feelings—in the right place."

My supervisor laughed at my awkwardness, then offered his perspective. "I think our sexuality is a God-given gift, something to be enjoyed and savored. When I feel sexual in the presence of another, whether that be my wife or someone else, it's a sign that I am human, I am alive. I am *blessed* with sexuality."

This exchange, now 10 years old, marked a turning point for me. Rather than seeing my sexuality as something that could only be felt "in the right place," I turned towards understanding and embracing my sexuality as a Creator-given pleasurable gift. More recently I have understood my sexuality to be integral to my very being and explored the relationship between my sexuality and my faith.

Working on this newsletter with the theme of "Healthy Sexuality" has been fascinating. When the Women's Concerns Committee first approached me, I reacted with contrasting responses. I was very supportive of the idea, delighted that we could consider exploring the topic. Given the storytelling tradition of the newsletter, I hesitated, wondering whether we could find individuals willing to tell the story of their sexuality. I also yearned to immerse myself

in the positive dimensions of a subject in counterpoint to the overwhelming negative dimensions of sexuality I experience as a counsellor of sexually abused survivors, as a friend who has ached over shared sexual wounds, and as a woman living



in a sexist and abusive society. So with all of those feelings, I said yes.

I imagined focusing on healthy sexuality, and for this issue at least avoiding unhealthy sexuality. I found it was not possible. We start with our experience. Our experience, as Mennonite and Brethren in Christ women, includes wounded sexuality. Daily I was reminded of those wounds.

I see a "soft" pornographic picture hanging in a public place in a fellow Christian's home. Yet another friend says, "I've just remembered the abuse..." Newspaper articles tell of clergy abuse in a boys' orphanage. I hear teenagers struggle with their desire for intimacy, their fear of rejection, their difficulty voicing their messages for closeness and distance, and then having those messages ignored or not respected. A lesbian speaks painfully of the church's rejection.

I draw conclusions. We all have been injured in our sexuality. Our sexuality is complex and multi-layered. First family experiences shape our sexuality, which then shapes our childhood, our adolescence, and our adult sexual behavior and feelings. Our sexuality is intimately connected to our deepest selves, our very identity. We lack an adequate language to express this complexity.

Still we yearn for wholeness in our sexual selves. And we need to begin somewhere, so in this issue we consider healthy sexuality. Two previous issues of this publication have addressed related topics. The July-August 1982 *Report* was, "Focus on Sexuality." "Women and Body Image" was featured in the November-December 1984 *Report*.

A working document prepared for the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church aids our discussion. In *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*, we read that sexuality is "our way of being in the world as male and female," and includes our body and self-image, our attitudes and roles in relationships with others, and physical sexual expression. This broad conceptualization of sexuality is both

accurate and useful. This helpful book and others are listed in the "Resources" section.

Carolyn Holderread Heggen offers us "A Theology of Sexual Ethics." Willard Krabill explores language and attitudes in his article. Both Heggen and Krabill call us to form a "sexual counter culture." People were willing to tell their stories (although I did receive a number of no's on the way to receiving a couple of yeses.) Carolyn Hilbert speaks as a single woman. Helen and Jim Reusser tell of their separate and joined sexual histories. The "how-to's" offered in "Embracing Sexuality" round out the issue.

In the course of preparing for this newsletter by reading and meditating, I phrased some of my gratefulness to God in a "Psalm Praising God for Sexuality." The opening lines read,

*Mother and God,
What pleasure you take in my female body!
For you formed me in my mother's womb
With tender joy.*

It continues with verses praising God for one's skin, mouth, breasts, genitals and womb. In informal consultation with some friends and some MCC staff, it was decided the psalm was too explicit to publish in *Report*. But many felt the poem did have sufficient merit that we wanted to make it available on request. To receive a copy send your request to me (plus \$1 for copying and postage) at 131 Erb Street West, Waterloo, ON N2L 1T7.

I acknowledge that voices of divorced, widowed and lesbian women are absent in this issue. Hopefully this issue will encourage listening to each other and respecting each other's sexuality.

I am repeatedly struck by our limited ability to understand and articulate the experience of our own sexuality. I hope this issue will aid our ability. May we find places to smile, weep, heal, speak and celebrate.

—Melissa Miller

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"...the church needs to articulate and model a healthy, Christlike, counter-cultural understanding of sexuality."

by Carolyn Holderread Heggen

A Theology of Sexuality

Perhaps it is presumptuous for anyone to attempt to articulate a theology of something as complex and conflict-laden as sexuality. It may be particularly preposterous for someone like myself, not formally trained in the discipline of theology. However, if theology is, as 11th Century church leader Anselm suggests, faith trying to understand itself in the context of our modern world and its contemporary issues, then perhaps I am qualified to theologize.

Until recently, few Christian writers have struggled to develop a holistic understanding of sexuality. Sexuality has most often been viewed with fear and dread, as a peripheral and dangerous aspect of our lives.

Most of us have observed within our lifetime a cultural swing from sexual repression to one of sexual obsession. Granted, the Christian community has never been able to count on society to establish standards of sexual behavior which reflect Christian values. But perhaps now more than ever, the church needs to articulate and model a healthy, Christlike, counter-cultural understanding of sexuality.

I believe a theology of sexuality must address three issues: a proper biblical understanding of the body, God's intentions for sexuality, and ways to reverse the effects of the Fall in male-female relationships.

A Biblical Theology of the Body

A theology of sexuality must begin with a biblical understanding of the body. Much of our discomfort and suspicion with sexuality appears to be based on nonbiblical attitudes predating Christianity and found in pagan Greece and Rome.

Greco-Roman dualism divided the universe into opposing forces: the spiritual realm and the material realm. Humans were believed to have a soul and a body—a higher and a lower nature. The body was a prison for the soul, which was in constant battle against the temptations and weaknesses of the flesh. Humans must work to tame the body and its desires so that the soul could escape bodily corruption.



These dualistic notions are not predominant in either the Old or New Testament, but later Christian writers were highly influenced by these ideas. Augustine, one of the most influential teachers of the early Western church on issues of marriage and human sexuality, was strongly influenced by dualism. He taught that sexual intercourse was the greatest threat to spirituality and should be engaged in only for procreation and then only in a manner which does not bring "sexual pleasure." Man should love his wife's soul but hate her body as an enemy.

We live in a culture which has a different but equally destructive and unbiblical notion of the body. Particularly for women, the body is elevated as the ultimate asset. Bizarre and self-destructive behaviors occur in an attempt to conform the body to currently popular notions of thinness, youthfulness and beauty. Because women are told their value is tied to their physical beauty, many spend enormous amounts of time, energy and money trying to meet current cultural standards of feminine beauty, deemphasizing their development in other areas.

A biblical theology of the body will affirm the goodness of our bodies in their femaleness and maleness. It will invite both men and women to claim the blessedness of being

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created in the image of God. It will celebrate the rich variety of body shapes and sizes and will deplore standards and devices of beauty which dehumanize, weaken and restrict.

The divine incarnation of Jesus is an expression of the importance of the human body in the purposes of God. Our theology must invite both female and male to rejoice and delight in our body-selves and to embrace our sexuality as a creational good which reflects the sociability that is part of the image of God within us. "So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27).

James Nelson, in *Embodiment*, observes that the way we think and feel about our bodies will find expression in the

way we think and feel about God, the world and others. As a therapist working with perpetrators of sexual abuse, I have observed the dangers of a dualistic understanding of the body which results in a false spiritualization of personhood and a minimization of the importance of the things done by one's body to another's body. When confronted with his sexually abusive behavior toward a young daughter, one devout Christian man said, "But that wasn't really me—that was my unredeemed carnal nature that did that to her." Repentance, healing and changed behavior could only happen when he was able to accept that his body, with its deviant sexual urges, was as much a part of him as the part which led the congregation in worship, visited the sick, prayed and fasted.

God's Intentions for Sexuality

A useful theology of sexuality must secondly address God's intentions for sexuality. Ours is a culture which is obsessed with sex, which has made an idol out of sexual pleasure.

The primary Old Testament purpose for marriage and sexuality was to produce children. The Hebrews were God's chosen people and they were commanded to populate the earth. The biblical concept expressed in Genesis 2:24 of mates becoming "one flesh" involves more than the mere act of intercourse. Children bear the genes of both parents, in a marvelous way combining aspects of both parents in one flesh.

Beyond the procreative function of sexuality is the Biblical notion of sexuality as the means for joyous expression of love. While we have preferred to spiritualize the Song of Songs in the Bible, it may more accurately be seen as a graphic portrayal of romantic love and physical sensuality joined together in sexual expression. Indeed, intimate sexuality can be a playful, exuberant expression of love. It can be a way for married couples to lay aside the heavy responsibilities of parenting and daily demands and celebrate life together.

In Ephesians 5:21-23 Paul speaks of the unifying function of sexual expression in marriage when he compares the husband/wife relationship to the union between Christ and the church. Family therapist and seminary professor Ross Bender observes that the union in one flesh of a husband and wife can overcome temporarily the tension in the female/male relationship as they experience existentially a oneness. The human desire for sexual closeness expresses a deep longing for communion with each other and with God. Bender notes

that what makes the relationship between Christ and the church and the relationship between wife and husband analogous is the spiritual union, "the union of mind, heart and spirit, of values, intention and destiny."

Humans do not need genital contact to be fulfilled and content. Married or single, however, we all must have love, affection, tender touch and intimate communication to live creatively and happily. Celibate singles are no less sexual than their married counterparts. Instead of expressing their sexuality in genital relationships, sexuality for the celibate person will be expressed in affectionate relationships of deep friendship and care. Both married and single people need to be in close relationships with females and males as we attempt to develop our divinely created nature in the image of God.

Unlike contemporary culture which tends to view sexual expression as a mere physical, biological act, the church must view it in the context of spiritual, emotional and moral considerations. Sexuality must always be integrated into the total life of the individual and dare not be compartmentalized.

A holistic understanding will allow us to claim and enjoy our sexuality as an integral part of our lives, under the accountability and discipline of the Holy Spirit and other believers. By not embracing our sexuality it becomes split off and more likely to operate without the constraints of personal and corporate scrutiny and guidance.

Reversing the Effects of the Fall in Male-Female Relationships

A third issue which a theology of sexuality must address is the distortions in female-male relationships caused by the Fall. Both the Old and New Testaments state that all persons are created in the image of God and are given mutual dominion over the rest of creation. One result of the Fall is that man now has a tendency to pervert shared dominion into the domination of woman. The positive, mutual interdependence that existed between man and woman before the Fall is distorted. As Christian psychologist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen observes in her book *Gender and Grace*, there is something akin to a congenital flaw in men that makes it easy for them to assume a right of domination over women.

Biblical scholar Gilbert Bilezikian discusses in his book *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible*, the counterpart result of the Fall for woman. She will experience an unreciprocated longing for intimacy with man and her desire for community will be distorted by sin. Thus women will tend to avoid taking responsibility for accountable dominion for the sake of preserving even pathological relationships. Women will be inclined to give too much in return for too little, to love indiscriminately and thus perpetuate their subordination to men. A perusal of contemporary self-help books indicates that indeed women are seeking to understand their propensity for destructive, enmeshed relationships.

Jesus contravened law and custom to treat women as human beings equal in worth to men. His parables reflect a balance of masculine and feminine imagery and concerns, remarkable even by today's standards. He disregarded laws which sustained woman's inferiority and uncleanness. His prohibitions against divorce seem to be an attempt to give equal rights to women in the marriage relationship.

Jesus related to all people, including women, not on the basis of their socially defined roles, but on the basis of their common humanity. The gospels portray Jesus as one who reached out affirmingly even when it meant breaking dehumanizing customs and laws. The church must emulate Jesus. It must call women and men to participate together in their full and equal humanity. It must model and teach mutuality and equality between males and females. It is only in relationships of mutual respect, commitment and equality that we can become the counter-cultural model of love and healthy sexuality that our world so desperately needs.

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"Sexuality is rather everything about a person that derives from being female or male—body, psyche, role. Sexuality is such an integral part of who we are that some have termed it our quest for wholeness."



by Willard Krabill

Needed: A Sexual Counter Culture

A photo of a glowing young woman, obviously pregnant and obviously radiant. A lovely picture, right? What if the woman is nude, and on the front cover of a fashion magazine? Some defend the photo as a celebration of femininity. Others react by pulling the magazine off the shelf because "some customers might find it offensive."

At least one newspaper depicts the controversy as a debate between sinful or sexy. Do these two words capture the debate? What is it that's sinful or sexy—the nudity or the pregnancy? Or do those words only offer inadequate tags for how we view women, or sexuality, or women's sexuality? Or is the issue the exploitation of women?

One thing seems clear, the photo and the controversy over it point to a deeper issue—the discomfort we experience with sexuality. We often find ourselves tongue-tied or reduced to describing sexuality with incorrect or polarized terms like "sinful or sexy."

In this article, I'd like to address some ways that we, as North American Mennonites and Brethren in Christ church people, could articulate a healthier understanding of our sexuality. Our particular subculture *is* different, and I'd like to look at some of the ways we are, and ways we should be even more so, a different community—a "counter culture" if you please, in an American cultural milieu that is sexually obsessive, genitally preoccupied, rife with sexual ignorance and misunderstanding, and abusive toward both women and men—but especially toward women.

We build a sexual counter culture in the way we use language. Consider the terms sexuality and sexual intercourse. They should not be confused, although they often are. Genital activity is but a part of sexuality and one can be a whole, healthy, fulfilled, vibrantly sexual being without ever experiencing genital intercourse.

Sexuality is rather everything about a person that derives from being female or male—body, psyche, role. Sexuality is

everything that defines us as females or males living in a world of whole persons, some male, some female, two sexes communicating and relating in both good and bad ways. Sexuality is such an integral part of who we are that some have termed it our quest for wholeness.

But we live in a world that confuses sexual activity and sexuality, that doesn't understand that sex is who I am, not an act that I may or may not do. A local newspaper described a Mennonite church college's sexuality guidelines with the headline "Strict Policy on Sex Outlined for Students." It reported, "Goshen College acknowledges that sexuality cannot be separated from the other dimensions of life, but members of the collegiate community are expected to stay away from it until they're married."

Stay away from our sexuality? Really? I heard a story of an American tourist couple who were telling their friends about their visit to Venice. They said, "You know, we didn't stay very long, because Venice was having terrible problems with all that flooding—water everywhere!" To be Venice is to be flooded. To be human is to be sexual. That's who we are, all our lives, all the time.

Let's continue to build our sexual counter culture by developing an alternate understanding to the term "good looking." In our media "good looking" and "sexy" tend to get so intertwined with each other, that to be "good looking" usually means to be "sexy" or at least sexually appealing—never mind one's character, thoughtfulness, loyalty, generosity, values—all of which enhance one's attractiveness.

Striving for worldly "good looks" can become an obsession. In our society, "good looking" is defined in terms of handsome faces, legs, thigh proportion, hairy chests or bust measurements—ignoring the personal worth of many of us.

Our culture has especially subscribed for women an image of female beauty that is unnatural and unphysiologic. It is contrary to what *normally* happens as women mature, and thus the majority are automatically consigned to the ranks of

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the "not good looking." The desire for thinness and unrealistic body image is one of the pernicious factors that has made eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia major problems with young North American women today. The false value assigned to physical good looks is one of the prime characteristics of the secular culture.

On what should the establishment of a Christian counter culture be based?

1. In the first place, it should be based on a profound respect for human personhood, and honoring of and respect for each individual, each female and each male.
2. Secondly, this should be based on our concern for others, and awareness of the fundamental way in which we're part of each other. Individuals thrive best in community—not in isolation—and our own sexuality is enhanced by honoring and respecting the sexuality of others.
3. Our counter-culture should be based on the scriptures and our Christian faith. Our beliefs regarding human wholeness and personhood are derived from biblical truth and the Bible has a high and celebrative view of our sexuality.
4. It would be based on concerns for peace and justice. Can we imagine what would happen if the male half of the human race and the female half of the human race could achieve true peace with each other, living together in harmony, equality, love, mutual respect and honor? Both world peace and individual peace would be remarkably enhanced.

Justice is denied when women are treated as sex objects and not as persons, or when men rate women's worth by their bodies. Justice is denied when men are stereotyped or not permitted a healing role because they were born male. It is unjust to discriminate against anyone on the basis of their gender, their race or their sexual orientation.

True sexual freedom is realized when we are part of a community that honors our sexuality and our uniqueness, that frees us from genital compulsivity and preoccupation, and that frees us for trusting relationships.

Willard Krabill retired from being physician of Goshen College in 1991. He served there for 24 years and taught sexuality classes for 17 years. He and his wife Grace have four children and three grandchildren. They live in Elkhart, Ind.

"I thought, OK, if I don't get married, I'm going to be happy anyway."

by Carolyn Hilbert

Sexual and Single

My journey in understanding and enjoying my sexuality has included understanding my faith and my childhood better.

When I was five years old, my parents were saved. They took very seriously the verse in the Bible that says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Whenever I did something wrong, they spanked me. I understood God as being similar to my parents. "If I do something wrong, he'll spank me," I reasoned.

When I was in my 20s, I took an occupational test. The psychologist who interpreted the test suggested that I go for therapy, which I did for approximately two years. It was the best thing I could have done. As I was discovering who I was, I saw that I had a very bitter concept of sex. My angry feelings about my parent's use of physical punishment spilled over to my imagined relationship with a husband. "I'll withhold sex as punishment to my husband if he does something that does not suit me," I thought.

At the same time, sex was something I desired because I wanted to grow up and have a family—four children to be exact. But I never had a lot of boyfriends. I had a lot of boys for friends; they came to me with their problems, or we had brother-sister relationships.

Through therapy I had insight into people's basic needs such as love, the need to be needed, etc. So my ideas changed a lot. Loving myself gave me a new perspective. I don't need sex to be happy. Just enjoy people.

Since my concept changed, I thought, OK, if I don't get married, I'm going to be happy anyway. I do things I really enjoy. I travel—small trips and big trips. I became a nurse, first an LPN, then an RN, and now a charge nurse. I am a deacon in our church and a Sunday School teacher.

I bought a home where I have a small garden to tinker in. I entertain a lot. When I do entertain, I almost always invite



single and married people together. I love to sew as a hobby. I am now in the process of writing my own cookbook.

I also found I have a strong need to be around children, so I had my cousins visit my home for vacations. I got involved with church kids. (I found the parents loved the break.) To this day I have a lot of interactions with little kids and also the grown-up ones that have joined me in special activities. I am called "auntie" by many.

Sex does not have the answers for deep emotional hurts. You can only have a good sex life if you have the rest of your life together. Sex is to be something special. If God wants me married, I'll accept the challenge as he sees fit. Together he and I can do it. As of now I am enjoying my singleness.

I am just like every other human being. I get lonely at times. That's when I thank God for friends. I get in my car and go visit them whether they be married or single. I also appreciate my family and they love to have me around. Yes I made many changes, some of them painful, but the journey has brought me to where I am today.

Books that have helped me include *The Sensitive Woman* by Sandra S. Chandler, *Touching: The Human Significance of Skin* by Ashley Montagu, *Love without Fear* by Eustace Chasser and *The Power of Sexual Surrender* by Marie N. Robinson.

At this point in my life I am very happy. I can keep a very busy schedule without consulting anyone. I come and go as I wish and am very happy in what I do.

The bottom line is: "You are only as happy married as you are single."

Carolyn Hilbert is a member and deacon of the Harrisburg (Pa.) Brethren in Christ Church. Her days are full and rich as she works as a charge nurse, and practices her love of people, entertaining, gardening, cooking and sewing.

by Jim and Helen Reusser

Best Friends

To tell the story of our sexual histories, we begin by considering our first families. (We alternate between first person when we're talking about us as a couple, and third person when one of us is reflecting.)

Helen grew up in southern Ontario surrounded by women. Two of her mother's three sisters and her father's only sister were single. Her widowed grandmother was another important family member. Helen had one sister, six years younger.

Helen's closest relationship, though, was with her father. In many ways, she became "her father's son." When they needed a fourth for horseshoes, Helen pitched. She also accompanied her father fishing.

Helen's mother was a little woman, quite feminine. She sewed beautifully. She was very sweet, a topnotch cook and homemaker, a wonderful mother. She was also stoic and quite reserved in expressing affection. Her views were undoubtedly influenced by her mother, Helen's grandmother, who was rather conservative about sexual matters. She frequently made comments portraying sex as something "suspect." She was also very concerned about "what others think," and passed this attitude to her daughter.

Helen's father, a university professor, offered a different approach. One of the first Mennonites in Ontario to receive an advanced degree, he experienced a great deal of criticism for his "higher learning." He held clear opinions and urged Helen to do so and to never fear speaking out. He was extremely careful and organized in his teaching and personal relationships.

Helen remembers that he demonstrated affection many times by bringing a flower to mother and putting it in her hair. But her mother found it hard to reciprocate. In the absence of a close sexual life, he threw himself into his work. As newlyweds they called their "honeymoon" the first year living in Wisconsin, where he worked on his master's degree. He became a highly successful academic and won the two highest teaching awards in his field.



Helen received some of her sex education through reading materials distributed at Vacation Bible School. What she remembers are messages to "be careful how you act around men" and how you let them act around you. Her father gave her more helpful information.

She had no information about menstruation and was frightened at the onset of her first period. Her mother then told her how to take care of herself, but it was not a good introduction. Through Helen's adolescence she had close girlfriends in high school, but she often felt lonely and out of touch with her peers. Her family lived in Guelph, where her father taught. Their church was in Kitchener, a 30 minute drive. During the war years when Helen was a teenager, gas consumption was rationed so she could not travel to midweek activities. Her mother urged her to date local boys, to "fit in" but Helen found her values different. Also, during her teens she suffered from a painful curvature of the spine and was often not well.

She had one long-term relationship in her late teens, and when she went to college, a number of casual dates. In Voluntary Service, she had a close satisfying relationship that stopped at the end of the VS assignment, which was heart-breaking for her. By the time she went to seminary in 1951, she was preparing herself for a single life. Her relationships with friends hadn't seemed to go anywhere. Then she met Jim.

Jim's family had a very different sexual atmosphere. His parents were openly affectionate and have always been intentional in their communication with each other.



His parents were “muppies” years ahead of their time. His father served as minister of music in several congregations in the eastern United States. Mennonite in background and in firmly held beliefs, they lived outside Mennonite communities throughout their married life, and made their church homes in other denominations.

Their sex roles were quite stereotyped. A neighbor couple remarked (after years of observing his parents) that they would love to have their sons marry Mennonite girls, but would never want their daughters to marry Mennonite boys.

Jim recalls blissful times before his sister was born when he and his mother would go walking, absorbing all his mother’s love. His two sisters arrived four years and eight years after him. Though he was never really close to them, he had girls as friends. He always had a best male friend during his growing up years.

Jim’s early adolescent years were blessed with a super gang of friends. Usually there were about 10 young people in the

group, five girls and five fellows. The girls organized parties, where everyone was divided into couples to play “kissing games.” These friends were “nice kids,” intellectually stimulating and fun; it was a great place for early sexual exploration.

Jim was also quite shy. Although he had his first experience of being “sweet” on a girl, he couldn’t get up the nerve to ask her out.

His parents tried to give him sexual information, but found it to be an awkward task. His dad gave him a book, saying “read this” without further comment. Some of his sex education came from “dirty books” in the boys washroom at school. They were really wild and gross, he remembers. In junior high, he had formal classroom education and informal schoolyard talk, as other boys told jokes and described their exploits. By solitary reading and reflecting, he developed an understanding of masturbation as acceptable. (Helen came to this same understanding in the same way.)

"To be loved by Jim, to experience oneness with one another, to be healed of my 'unlovability'—I found it all quite overpowering. It was a spiritual experience for me, and I still marvel at the mystery of it all, how the one flesh experience teaches us of our oneness with God."

Through high school he only overcame his shyness two or three times to ask girls to major school events. He begun regular casual dating his first year of college and liked it. In VS, he twice developed more serious relationships with conservative Mennonite women, but those ended. In 1951, he headed to seminary where he met Helen.

The two years of dating before marriage were wonderful times. Our daily bus ride provided 90 minutes of talking time. We continued our talks long into the night sitting at the top of the stairs of the large, aged luxury homes the seminary had renovated into apartments. That was when we were living in the same community.

When in different cities, we corresponded frequently. Our love of communication, our enjoyment of each other and our delight in discovering shared values all helped as we quickly became each other's "best friends."

One night Helen lay in bed in her Guelph family home writing a letter to Jim. Her father came into the room. "Do you have to write everyday?" he asked. "Yes," Helen replied. Her father turned and left, knowing where the relationship was going. Helen wasn't so certain at the time Jim made his first marriage proposal. She declined, citing the difference in their ages (Helen was 4 1/2 years older), her recurring back pain and her interest in mission field ministry. Jim said, "I'll be back" and the next time she accepted.

At Helen's initiative, we refrained from kissing prior to engagement. Helen was somewhat fearful of physical passion and wanted the relationship to stay in balance—emotionally, spiritually and physically. The no kissing rule was one way to keep everything in balance. After becoming engaged in 1952, our physical relationship progressed gradually and warmly. Helen felt quite safe in the relationship, and could allow herself physical expression. The sexual dimension became increasingly intense.

After our marriage in July 1953, we lost no time in enjoying intercourse. For Jim it was the obvious and natural next step to his lifetime experiences of positive expressions of intimacy.

Helen was quite overwhelmed by the power of this deep level of sexual communication. "To be loved by Jim, to experience oneness with one another, to be healed of my 'unlovability'—I found it all quite overpowering. It was a spiritual experience for me, and I still marvel at the mystery of it all, how the one flesh experience teaches us of our oneness with God." She was also gradually healed of her back problems.

By and large our sexual relationship has been a source of joy, mutuality and comfort. We recognize that this is not true for everyone; in fact within our immediate family there are those who experience severe wounds in their sexuality. However, our shared sexuality has been a blessed gift.

We welcomed the coming of children into our home. We had the birth control information we needed. (Jim had informed himself thoroughly by reading the current literature available in the Bluffton College library.) We wanted to begin our family immediately and were pleased with the births of our three children, Mark in 1955, Kristen in 1958, and John in 1961. We returned to sexual intercourse eagerly as soon as Helen healed from childbirth, and did not experience the sexual strains known by many couples parenting young children. We tried to pass on to our children healthy, open attitudes about sexuality.

Our marriage has not been without conflict. One of the most extreme difficulties in the early years related to finances. Jim knew that a husband's role was to manage money tightly, just like his father, and he was ready to assume that role upon marriage. He also expected Helen to submit quietly to his guidance. Helen, accustomed to her father's expectation that she form and voice strong opinions, did not fit Jim's mold. "It took a few years to knock off my rough edges," Jim recalls.

Our sexuality has been affected by our aging. Now in our 60s we find our bodies reflecting the years. We have often experienced heavy workloads, and that diminishes sexual energy.

We still think of each other as best friends. That friendship and interdependency has deepened over the years, somewhat preventing us from forming close friendships with others. We

"Learn to accept, then love
and delight in your body."

by Melissa Miller

Developing Healthy Sexuality

see this as perhaps the lot of ministers. Because our friendships with our church members are based on our working relationships, we are discouraged from forming close relationships with them and therefore, need each other more.

Helen's views about sex changed a lot over the years. She feels anger at the church and society for promoting unhealthy attitudes about sex. The church often perverts sex and society trivializes it. She sums up her view by saying, "God as creator has made us. God has made everything good, and that includes people and human sexuality. Sex is special and to be saved for a relationship with a special person."

Helen's view of God has also shifted. "I was very tied to the idea of God as male, God as Father who loved me as my mother and father did. Now I say God is neither male nor female and that's a big change for me in recent years."

Jim knows his view of God is shaped by his personal experiences, including how his parents have shaped his view of God. "I think of both my mother and my father and how I make assumptions about God's male and female sides based on their characteristics. Still because I am male, I find myself more aware of God's male dimensions."

Jim finds it easy to reflect on the spiritual dimensions of sexuality. "Both faith and sexuality require commitment, respect, a giving of oneself and losing oneself in another. In both we recognize the need for each other's gifts, and benefit when we value one another's gifts. Both involve shalom—fullness, healing, wellbeing."

Helen and Jim Reusser are pastors of Mannheim (Ont.) Mennonite Church. Helen retired from being Minister of Education of Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada in 1989. Jim is admissions coordinator of Fairview Mennonite Home. Their leisure time is spent enjoying God's creation, including their five granddaughters.

How do we develop healthy sexuality? Here are a few suggestions based on ideas I've gleaned personally and professionally. Consider them starting points, and use what feels right for you.

1. Learn to accept, then love and delight in your body. Sexuality is intimately connected with body image. Given the dissatisfaction and even self-loathing which many of us have towards our bodies, we are hindered in our capacity to experience healthy sexuality.

- Look at your body, clothed and naked. Marvel at its complexity, abilities and varied composition.
- Touch your body. Tenderly rub an aching foot, apply fingertip massage to temples and scalp, stroke lotion on thirsty skin.
- Invite God into your body awareness. Pray when bathing. Look at yourself as God looks at you, like a loving, affectionate parent.
- Avoid comparing your body with others in negative ways. (For me, this has meant not looking at fashion magazines.) Learn about the hurts that lie behind abusive eating patterns so you can stop them.
- Refrain from making critical comments about your body. Speak of your body in kind, accurate, positive terms.

2. Move away from situations where sexuality is distorted and abused; move towards situations where sexuality is portrayed healthfully.

- Seek out literature where women's sexuality is portrayed in realistic, appreciative ways. Margaret Laurence, Jane Rule and Marge Piercy are three fiction writers who come to mind.
- Seek out television, movies and music that affirm your values. This is difficult because healthy sexuality is not generally mainstream and therefore not too visible. But it is possible and there is quite a significant counter-cultural stream that can be found with some inquiring.
- Read aloud the Songs of Solomon.

3. Accept and enjoy pleasure as a healthy, God-given gift.

- Consider what activities and people leave you feeling happy and energized. Partake of them frequently.

"Refrain from making critical comments about your body."



- Touch. Give and receive hugs, handholds and squeezes from a variety of friends and loved ones (checking the other's permission).
- Treat yourself to regular professional massage, if available in your community.

4. Develop attitudes toward sexuality based on respect, equality and commitment.

- Approach your sexual wounds compassionately; seek healing (through conversation with a trusted friend, professional counselling, reading, journaling, prayer).
- Participate in a women's group that discusses healthy sexuality, using a resource book or drawing primarily from personal experiences.
- Confront sexism and abusive sexuality. (For example, describing to the corner store owner your feelings about the pornographic literature that is placed beside the greeting cards, talking with your teenager about sexist music, telling a co-worker of your difficulty with abusive language.) Be gentle with yourself and others as you do so. Choose your timing carefully and carry a calm centeredness with you into the confrontation. Try to listen to the person you are confronting; this enables the most room for flexibility and change.
- Be aware of how women distort sexuality. Use your common gender as a starting point from which to discuss topics like body criticism and sexist attitudes towards men.

Resources

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Kitzinger, Sheila. *Women's Experience of Sex: The Facts and Feelings of Female Sexuality at Every Stage of Life*, Penguin Books, 1983.

Koch, Carl and Joyce Heil. *Created in God's Image: Meditating on Our Body*, Saint Mary's Press, 1989.

Nelson, James Boyd. *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, Augsburg, 1978.

Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart. *Gender and Grace: Love, Work, and Parenting in a Changing World*, InterVarsity Press, 1990.

Women in Ministry

- **Joy Lapp** began October 1 as interim pastor at Lawrence (Kan.) Fellowship.

- **Agnes Polk** was ordained Oct. 6 at Arvada (Col.) Mennonite Church.

- **Julie Hershey-Bergen** is new youth pastor/leader at Mennonite Community Church in Fresno, Calif.

- **Doris Gascho** was ordained November 10 at Shantz Mennonite Church in Baden, Ont.

Letters

- Mennonite friends in St. Jacobs, Ont., have just shared with me the *Women's Concerns Report* on Shopping Cart Power. Enclosed is my check for a year's subscription. I am impressed with the global understanding that underlies this issue on shopping cart power. We are also connected to women globally by our gasoline consumption. Something as simple as reducing our speed by 10 miles per hour can have a direct impact on the range of options available to the woman who is farming and who is partially dependent on oil-based fertilizers. In fact, every economic decision we make has an effect on the range of options available to woman and their children elsewhere on our shared earth. We have found, in our family, that our eating habits have changed drastically as we work to buy locally. In our support of local farmers we are able to choose food that is less poisoned and more healthy. While this cuts down the variety of things we eat as the seasons change, it increases our creativity and also helps local farmers, many of whom are woman, stay in business.

Buying locally also means we at least partially cut ourselves free of the "fashion" industry. Instead we have the fun of creating our own fashions. Local knitters, seamstresses, potters, jewelry makers, etc., all make an income.

This does cut down on buying clothing made in Taiwan and sold at K-mart. The women in Taiwan and the women who work at K-mart, etc., are probably affected. I do not like the either/or approach; either local women have jobs that are productive or Taiwanese women, at slave labor conditions, can eat. But I trust that if we rid ourselves of dependency on items produced by exploited workers, then the companies which exploit will abandon their sweat factories. Local women can then use their energy to raise food, feed and clothe their children. I realize this sounds utopian. But my years of travel throughout the world and my interviews with women's groups in more than 30 countries convince me that this approach is a viable one.

—Alice Wiser, Springfield, Pa.



- Greetings from Zimbabwe! I write to thank you for all the *Women's Concerns Reports*. Thanks for the wide range of subjects. Most are very relevant to us in Africa. I especially enjoyed the issues on the environment and the one on motherhood, careers and spirituality. Also extend my thanks to *Conciliation Quarterly* newsletter for the issue on "Pastoral Sexual Misconduct." It came when we were addressing this subject in our prayer group. Pastoral sexual abuse is a serious problem, but unfortunately it is a hush-hush topic people prefer to ignore rather than face squarely.

—Doris Dube, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

- **Ann Showalter** has begun a term as interim pastor of First Mennonite Church, Denver, Colo.

News and Verbs

- Muriel T. Stackley, editor of *The Mennonite*, has resigned effective September 1992. She has edited the General Conference publication for six years.
- Arega Bagirian is the **first Soviet** to take part in MCC's International Visitor Exchange Program. Arega is from Azerbaijan. She will teach Russian language and Soviet history at Lancaster (Pa.) Mennonite High School.
- **Three women were recipients** of the 1991 C. Henry Smith Peace Oratorical Contest. Jalene Schmidt of Bethel College in Newton, Kan., received first place for her essay "Discipleship, abortion and militarism." Amy Turner, student at Messiah College in Grantham, Pa., won second place for "The peace of God versus the violence of pornography." Shannon Kasdork of Bethany Bible Institute in Hepburn, Sask., received third place for an essay on wife abuse, "Reach out to the Wounded."
- Adina Kehler is **new editor of EMMC Recorder**, the magazine of the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference in Steinbach, Man.
- April Yamasaki has been appointed to the **faculty of Columbia Bible College** in Clearbrook, B.C. Her position includes responsibilities as an instructor and writer-in-residence. She is the author of *Where Two are Gathered: Readings for Shared Devotions* and the recently released *Remember Lot's Wife and Other Unnamed Women of the Bible*, both published by faithQuest, a division of Brethren Press.
- **Women in Mission** of the General Conference combined its fall business meeting with a Manitoba Women's Retreat in October at Camp Assiniboine, Headingly, Man. About 80 women attended.
- Nancy Brubaker, co-pastor at First Mennonite Church in Reedley, Calif., is the new **editor of Pacific District Messenger**.
- Some 25 Chilean women took part in a meeting in Santiago, Chile, on "**Theology from a Women's Perspective**." The event was sponsored by the Evangelical Theological Community seminary there. Participants included Mennonite Board of Missions worker Karen Guenther.
- *The Nature of Things* is a **collection of poetry** by Goshen (Ind.) College senior Regina Weaver. It was published by Pinchpenny Press and is available through the college English Department.
- Arlene Mark is editing a **collection of Anabaptist-Mennonite worship resources**. She invites materials that are original or adapted from historic peace church sources (nothing from published anthologies). Materials used will be edited and items submitted will not be returned. Send submissions to Arlene Mark, 29222 Frailey Dr., Elkhart, IN 46514.
- "A Time for Healing: A **Biblical Perspective on Domestic Violence** and Sexual Abuse," is the title of a March 13-14 conference at Fort Garry Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg, Man. MCC Manitoba and Voices for Non-Violence are co-sponsoring the event.
- MCC Great Lakes is sponsor of a March 20-21 **conference on facing family violence and sexual abuse**, "Breaking Silence, Bringing Hope." The meeting will be at Sonnenburg Mennonite Church in Kidron, Ohio.
- Goshen College is **seeking applicants for residence hall director** at the college. Minority people and women are encouraged to apply. Contact Norman Kauffman, Director of Student Development, Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526; 219-535-7639.



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- Resource packet on **chronic mental illness** for congregations and pastors, developed by Karen Jantzi, mental health advocate for Franconia Mennonite Conference. Cost is \$5. Send checks payable to Franconia Mennonite Conference to Karen Jantzi, Box 116, Souderton, PA 18964; telephone 215-723-5513.
- Gail Kunkel of Toronto has produced a **1992 calendar focusing on child abuse and its prevention**. Cost is \$13. Order from Gail at P2-2703 St. Clair Ave. East, Toronto, ON M4B 3M3.
- *Naked and Uncensored: A Counterfeit Love Story* is the name of a **new video on pornography** produced by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. Available for rental from Ontario Mennonite Resource Centre, 50 Kent Ave., Kitchener, ON N2G 3R1. Or purchase for \$22 (Cdn.) from Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, 175 Riviera Dr., Markham, ON L3R 5J6.
- "Re-Imagining in Creation, Community, Church: A **Global Women's Theological Colloquium**," will be Nov. 4-7, 1993, in Minneapolis, Minn. The event is sponsored by the Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women. For information, contact: Rev. Sally Hill, Twin Cities Metropolitan Church Commission, 122 W. Franklin, Room 100, Minneapolis, MN 55404; 612-870-3600.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

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